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NEWS RELEASE

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Health Officials Begin Testing People, Mosquitoes and Birds for West Nile Virus

A warm spring has Idaho health officials on the lookout for West Nile virus, an infection that is spread to people through the bite of an infected mosquito. Beginning this month, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare and the seven Idaho Health Districts will join forces to collect and analyze mosquito and bird populations to monitor the spread of the virus. The virus may first show up in birds or mosquitoes and give health officials an early sign that the virus has entered Idaho. Healthcare providers also are keeping an eye out for West Nile virus infections in their patients.

Idaho is one of the few states that has not discovered West Nile virus in its bird or mosquito populations. West Nile virus has spread rapidly across the United States since it was first discovered in New York in 1999. Infected birds transport the disease, and feeding mosquitoes become infected by the birds. Mosquitoes can then pass the infection to people.

"We expect to see West Nile virus in our state this year, and are working with the Health Districts to detect human illness and to test mosquitoes and selected dead birds," says Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Deputy State Epidemiologist. Mosquitoes will be trapped throughout the state and tested at the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's state lab. People who notice suspicious bird deaths, especially crows, ravens, magpies and raptors, should contact their local health district for possible collection and testing.

West Nile virus is not serious for most people, however, in rare instances it can cause serious illness and even death. Last year, almost 10,000 human cases of West Nile virus were reported in the United States, with 262 deaths attributed to the virus. Many of the more serious illnesses occurred in people over the age of 50.

Dr. Tengelsen is urging people to take precautions now for themselves and their families. This includes avoiding mosquito bites and mosquito-proofing their homes. "People can wear long-sleeved shirts, pants, and socks when outdoors, and apply insect repellent containing DEET to clothing or exposed skin according to manufacturers' instructions," she says. "People should also be extra careful at dawn and dusk, when mosquitoes are most active."

Around the home, people can repair or install screens, clean rain gutters, and every three to five days empty water containers, bird baths or decorative ponds to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. You can also check to make sure your sprinkler or irrigation system is not creating puddles that provide mosquito breeding habitat.

Most household pets are not affected by West Nile virus, but 30 percent of horses infected with West Nile virus may die. There is no vaccine available for people, but there is a horse vaccine. Horse owners should contact their local veterinarian about protecting their animals.

For more information about West Nile virus, please visit the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's web site at www2.state.id.us/dhw/cdp/westnile/west_nile_index.htm, or contact your District Health Department.

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(Editors: For more information, contact Public Information Officer Tom Shanahan at 208-334-0668, or your District Health Department.)